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ABSTRACT

This conference presentation offers general guidelines for planning a new child care facility. Particular attention is given to site selection, space requirements, functional requirements, materials, climate, and choosing an architect. (RH)

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PLANNING AN EFFECTIVE CHILD CARE CENTER

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from a Workshop presented at the Conference
HOW SUCCESSFUL DIRECTORS MANAGE
May 7 and 8, 1986
Hyatt Regency, Chicago, Illinois

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To develop a new child care facility, a number of factors should receive careful consideration, but take advantage of this challenging opportunity. Plan your center to make your job simpler and more pleasant, so you can begin each day in surroundings that are a joy for children and staff, while presenting a fresh face to parents and to the community as a whole. Develop a space that is suited to your program, your philosophy and your community. Site location, climate and building materials must work in harmony, and smooth operation depends on adequately sized and arranged space. Initially, choosing a qualified architect makes all of these exciting decisions easier.

Site Selection

Choosing the appropriate location requires meticulous planning. Use a map of the proposed area, and shade out unsuitable sections. Legal restrictions, access, and neighboring traffic and buildings will shape these choices. The pattern of community development should also come into consideration. The pattern that emerges will provide a handy guide during the search for land.

Legal restrictions will eliminate many prospective sites immediately. The property must have zoning that permits use as a day care center, and building code and licensing requirements must also correspond to such usage at a given site. Your architect can aid you in making these determinations.

The ideal site will offer convenient access for patrons and staff

alike. Look for proximity to your clients--perhaps a growing residential area with young families, an industrial park, a large office center or other major employment center. Be sure it is easy to reach, but accessibility and safety must balance, keeping children safe from heavy traffic.

Foresee the future. Population trends and community development should place the center in the path of future growth. Have a demographic study done to find out where young families with children and couples of child-bearing age are settling. Talk to the local or regional planning department to find out long range plans and demographic trends.

Space Requirements

Obviously, the size of both structure and site must satisfy the program's needs; furthermore, the projected size will help in choosing a good site. The size will depend largely on the number of children and staff, but other varying factors also determine exact needs.

The full time number of children provides the basic parameter since most licensing and code requirements are expressed in square feet of space per child, number of fixtures per child and so on. Many licensing and code requirements specify a minimum of thirty-five square feet per child for activity areas. Storage and other ancillary spaces will double the square footage needed. Provide enough land, properly oriented, for all required uses, including the structure, playground, driveway, parking and drop-off area, and utilitarian needs like trash and janitorial storage. Our firm assumes a minimum square footage requirement of 70-150 square feet per child for the building and 3750-10,000 square feet of outdoor playground. Planning for ten parking spaces would mean providing 3000-4500 square

feet of parking, drive and drop-off zone. The total (about 10,000-22,000 square feet) could go even higher depending upon other site considerations and local zoning regulations.

The final decision on space will call for careful consideration. Designing for precisely sufficient space to meet licensing requirements will result in the smallest, feasible building. It will work effectively, but may not provide room for future growth. Primary activity areas (toilet, kitchen and office spaces) can all vary in size depending on the budget and need, and entries and circulation within the space will also add to the total square footage. Today, many administrators and directors find it desirable to have conference and observation areas, a staff lounge, a work area for planning and materials preparation, meeting space, and other space amenities that serve to ease the operation of the center; however, they frequently sacrifice these features for the sake of economy, and budget can become the final measure for almost all areas in a day care center.

Functional Requirements

All day care centers are unique, with a program and a function that sets each one apart from the others; this uniqueness should influence the design of the building and create an efficient and harmonious interaction between all parts of the center. Activity areas should provide a diversity of environments with a mixture of structured and unstructured spaces, giving an opportunity for free activity and play, as well as planned activities. The spaces should organize around the established programs of the center, naturally promoting the circulation needs of the programs.

Activity spaces should allow for any given needs. Children need extra

room when they sprawl on the floor close to a reader. Dramatic play calls for space for performers, the audience and prop storage. Construction activities require ample storage for tools and materials as well as the worktable and room for several children to work around it.

Auxiliary areas must interact well with the activity areas. Children (especially toddlers) should have no trouble gaining access to correctly sized toilets and lavs. Place lavs or other water supply near areas for messy activities like painting and clay modeling to simplify cleanup and preparation. Staff and administration need room for records, office equipment, relaxation and meetings, but a delicate balance must exist between the demand for privacy and the need to observe the children. Carefully planned circulation patterns will allow children and staff to move easily and comfortably from home base to activity area and to linger in the all-important in-between spaces where they can observe activties.

Plan the outdor playground as an extension of the center, with areas for active and passive play. The playground design should also revolve around the children's varied activities, and the plan should lead children naturally from one activity to another, encouraging cooperation and sharing among the children. Paths for running and for trikes, space for water play and climbing equipment all add to the children's fun. Don't forget to include an adequate gate in the fence to facilitate movement of equipment and allow bringing in fresh sand for the sandbox.

A sheltered area with a roof to offer protection from rain and hot summer sun will extend the playground's use, and other means can add variety to a playground. Trees will shade the children while creating places for quiet play, and hills and berms lend privacy, interest, excitement and

new opportunities for imaginative games. If there are trees or hills on site try to incorprate them into your design. If not, plant and landscape. For the pleasure of all (children and adults) don't forget the garden. Give the children the opportunity to join in planning, planting and tending a garden of their own. They will enjoy growing flowers and vegetables and learn at the same time.

Materials

Give careful consideration to all materials used. They should look good, endure and provide a safe environment. In the playground use a variety of surfaces, ranging from bark, wood, grass and asphalt to artificial materials, always choosing the appropriate surfaces for a given activity. Inside, quarry tile flooring cleans easily and provides a suitable floor for food preparation and dining areas, as well as for areas for art projects and other messy activities. Emphasis should go toward durability for hard use along with appearance. Wall surfaces should wipe clean easily, without harming the finish; tile, high gloss paint or plasticized wall coverings all serve this purpose well. Carpeting for quiet areas comforts children sitting on one of their favorite seats--the floor. Other soft materials, wall hangings and acoustic ceiling tile all help to hold the noise to a tolerable level.

Don't be afraid to use color. Children respond well to clear, bright, primary colors and colors can accent, define and organize space. Blues and greens can help to create a quiet environment whereas yellows and reds can suggest activity.

Climate

More basic design considerations should help to tune your structure to the local climate. This continent divides into four climatic zones--the hot humid southeast; the hot arid southwest; the broad temperate zone which cuts across the mid section of the continent from coast to coast, and the cool zone of the north. Each zone has specific needs, and a building designed for one climatic setting may not suit an alternate climate zone. An appropriate design will have an important impact on the building's performance, offering reduction in cost of heating, cooling and lighting. A northern building needs a thick warm skin to shelter it from the cold winter, and it will benefit by admitting sunshine through south windows to warm the space. However, in hotter climates, buildings need shielding from the sun and designs geared for cool comfort. Temperature and humidity have a strong effect on the moods of children and inexpensive, responsive control can create a more pleasant atmosphere for all.

Choosing an Architect

An architect with experience in climatic responsive buildings and child care center design is especially important. The architect will assist you in developing your program and will translate it into a study model and sketches for your building. Next, the construction documents (drawings and specifications) will pattern the construction process.

Upon completion of the plans, the owner and architect select a contractor through bidding or negotiation and then sign an agreement with the contractor for the work. Throughout construction, the architect makes periodic visits to the site to determine that the project proceeds in

accordance with the construction documents. The architect advises and assists the owner with any payments or changes during construction and generally acts as the owner's agent in working with the contractor.

With the help of a qualified architect and with careful planning, a day care center can work fluidly and adapt to the climatic changes of the year as well as the population changes of the following years. By using the proper materials, location and arrangement you can build a center that you can be proud of and that will reflect well on its neighborhood.